# Walter Sickert's Miss Earhart's Arrival

# 'Walter Sickert's *Miss Earhart's Arrival*: Collapsing Paint and Flight in a Topical Painting'

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**Abstract:**

This article considers Walter Sickert's *Miss Earhart's Arrival* 1932 in relation to contemporary discourses on heavier-than-air flight. I look at the negotiation of the future in paint, and through discourse analysis of its reception I conclude that *Arrival* questions the capacities of new technologies. By examining a cross-medium practice concerned with transcribing found press images of historic events, I situate this work in my larger argument that Sickert's late work offers us perspectives on painting's mediation of changing interwar notions of historical time, Utopia/dystopia, and the capacity of paint to critically engage technologies of memory and transit both materially and temporally.

**Keywords**: ***Sickert, Earhart, flight, painting, futurity, interwar, intermediality, materiality***

This article widens our understanding of Walter Richard Sickert's *Miss Earhart's Arrival* (1932) [Fig.1] by involving discourses surrounding heavier-than-air flight in the early 1930s. By contextualising work which has previously been dismissed as topical painting devoid of social comment, we can not only explain the contradictory press reception the image received, but also gain some cultural insight into how aerial transport, 'flight' was being mediated in the interwar era. This paper argues that *Miss Earhart's Arrival* is the site of three intersecting technologies - paint, plane and photograph - and that its intermediality raised doubts surrounding the capacities of these media, and perhaps the utopian/dystopian potentials associated with flight. To demonstrate these problematics, this article will first examine the wider historical debates and associations surrounding this image's subject matter, long-distance powered flight, before looking at the specifics of its production, and finally analysing the implications of the press discourse with which it was received. By a process of sustained looking, I explore this as a case-study in my wider project of revising scholarship on 'late' Sickert, and expand on the complexities of his appropriation strategies in this period. Here 'arrival' constitutes a key to understanding issues of time and becoming which are at stake in this painting and in Sickert's wider practice. In the final analysis, the historian has much to gain from treating this painting's title more as an interrogative than the generic statement that it at first appears to be.

By 1932, Sickert was no longer a member of the pre-war avant-garde communities that represent the period of focus for the majority of Sickert scholarship. Sickert's position in the art world had risen dramatically - by making strategic use of institutional validation, his highest grossing works increased their market value by over 600% 1927-1928, [1] greatly out-competing the formalist painters favoured by Bloomsbury, the dominant modernist intelligentsia.[2] In the same year, possessing both the titles of A. R. A. and President of the Royal British Society of Painters, he was represented in three exhibitions simultaneously, while courting controversy by innovating in his society's exhibition procedures. In May 1932 the press was still reeling from the controversy of his *The Raising of Lazarus* when he drew huge crowds to the Beaux Arts Gallery to see a painting of the story dominating the news cycle - the first solo woman's flight across the Atlantic. By this point his practice, too, had altered dramatically. Whereas in Camden Town the artist had built a reputation as a controversial 'realist', in dialogue with scenes of working class interiors, choreographed and painted from drawings before the motif, by the 1930s he had developed an elaborate use of found images, painting from press-illustrations with self-declarative means.

Wendy Baron's account, however, typical of previous scholarship of *Arrival*, uses a formalist methodology to group it with other late Sickerts described as: "unique records of topical interest, it is improbable that Sickert's motivation was to create a record of his own time or to make a social comment. He was gripped by the way a particular

photographic image could capture a moment of high drama"[3] and simply "used topicality for publicity potential".[4] Possessing both a radical practice, and considerable cultural capital, the fact that 'late' Sickert has been marginalised seems hard to explain. It appears to be the outcome of wider approaches to 'Sickert', focused on biographical narrative and Formalist analysis. This reduced estimation of 'late' Sickert can be seen in Richard Shone's and Wendy Baron's landmark monographs in the field of Sickert studies.[5] It originates in Sickert's reception by the Bloomsbury elite. Where Vanessa Bell had seen them as "idiotic", and Clive Bell as "ridiculously feeble"[6], Sickert's first historian, Lillian Browse, would establish them as a pathology, evident in the word choice she associates with them: "deterioration", "tragic", "decline".[7] This treatment of the late works as symptoms of an artist in decline would permeate the majority of post-war critical perspectives.

*Miss Earhart's Arrival* was scaled up from a photograph and displayed within five days of Earhart's record-setting flight across the Atlantic - a feat of 'history painting' which astonished critics with both its innovative source and remarkable speed of production. To enrich our readings of 'late' Sickert, we need to position the artist in his social context, and ultimately in relation to the technologies he engaged.

A work of radically wide format, in close proximity the work engulfs the viewer's field of vision. Nonetheless, once situated inside this work we find ourselves simultaneously distanced from it. The viewer identifies with the crowd, and owing to the cropped lower edge we are

immersed within it, but confront obstacles to our view in the visual noise of the rain and the agglomeration of figures, with their fusion in a sea of mid-tones, their bodies a shared body politic. We see almost half the pictorial space left as under-painting still visible to us at the surface. Indeed, this painting is characterised by *variegation* in its surface - ranging from bare ground to impasto highlights, and, at its private view on the 28th May 1932, the underlying grid used in its transcription was still visible at the surface, a bold self-reference to its production.

The motifs implied by its title only reveal themselves to us slowly. The plane which defines and describes this composition is also diminished by it - reduced to a backdrop. Its almost architectural presence, however, dwarfs the notational profile that constitutes the only trace of the eponymous aviatrix. As the pre-eminent internal frame of the work, it is with the motif of the plane that we have to engage to understand the spectacle that, as a member of the crowd and of a mass newspaper readership, we are collectively 'witnessing'.

*Arrival's* physicality and self-declaration of means was complemented by its relatively unchallenged discursive presence in relation to conventional fine art representations of aircraft. From 1929, *aeropittura* [Fig.2] refocused Futurist conventions on the articulation of flight as an active process, the rendering of the vehicle secondary to the description of motion, the span of flight in time. In the British context, however, the aeronautical genre dissipated quickly after the end of the Great War, paintings of flight being the domain of those with direct experience, such as Nevinson [Fig.3] and John Turnbull [Fig.4],

and minor landscape painters such as George Horace Davis, and the motif virtually disappears in interwar British painting after 1920. What wartime and interwar modernist and academic representations share, however, is an emphasis on flight as an empowering condition, and one described as an uninhibited and emphatically technological rather than social process. Nevinson's planes surge upwards, out of reach, while Balla's and Bruschetti's dissipate into forever-circulating vectors of force. Rivera's Detroit Mural of the following year also presented flight in a state of becoming, heroic feats of production about to ascend. Sickert, however, represents flight grounded, and flight as a social spectacle - the aviatrix is present but disempowered, while the plane over-arches but is reduced to an inanimate material object. Instead of dynamic vectors or atmospheric effects marking the power of flight, in *Arrival* we see in a dripping wing tip the trace of omnipresent rain - its raking lines inhibiting and obscuring in their function for both viewer and flight. To contextualise what Corbett has referred to as a "troubling emotional tone"[8] in the work, we need to look at the wider field.

As Gore writes, between the wars, artists in the aviation genre had been largely restricted to illustration commissions.[9] Indeed, in the wider field of visual culture, we have to turn to illustrated news, marketing strategies and science fiction to locate the visual presence of flight in the 1930s. As Fanning argues, the large output of science-fictional representations in the interwar period drew on the subject matter and logics of reportage and state politics in their apocalyptic pretensions.[10] Real political and fiction claims influenced each other,

and in the first works of pulp fiction on both sides of the Atlantic, *Tales of Wonder* and *Blue Book,* we see planes represented with the capacity to travel through both time and space.

Its exceptional potential for progress was complemented by its superlative capacity for discord [Figs.5 and 6]. While pre-war science fiction had broadly deployed abstract threats, from unknown 'fatal engines' in George Tomkyns Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking* 1871, to alien agencies in Wells' *War of the Worlds* 1898, by the interwar years airpower was an explicit focus of dread and salvation in books such as J.F.C. Fuller's *The Reformation of War* (1923), Anderson Graham's *The Collapse of Homo Sapiens* (1923) and Dalton's *Black Death* (1934).

In contemporary newspapers, Baldwin's 'The Bomber Will Always Get Through' speech resonated with fears in 1932 surrounding flight's capacity for rapid and invisible attack, a fear which extended to all sectors of flight: "in civil aviation you have your potential bombers".[11] The ambivalences of science fiction were reiterated in projective pieces in journalism, the *Illustrated London News'* visual response to Baldwin's speech rendered anxieties concerning flight technology's future, but in portraying a 'gas attack', it represented flight's imminent threat by illustration rather than photography, and the plane itself cannot be seen deploying its payload or arriving in domestic airspace [Fig.5]. The index of aerial attack is the same gas which obscures the sky, the pictured faceless everyman of the future is victim to unseen aircraft.

While in advertising the plane was foregrounded, the end of a plane's journey was rarely represented [Figs.7-9]. Even in stock photography, the passenger plane is about to take off rather than arrive,

though photography is absent too in representations of the journey. Portrayal of the commercial aeroplane in flight was left predominantly to graphic work and the production of art deco posters. Here the plane casts its silhouette over the world, a global map at the viewer's disposal - the plane is read as encompassing vast distance and traversing it unidirectionally - always out-going, never returning. Like high art representations, flight is articulated as progressive motion, and a process of becoming - a perpetual embarkation in the realm of the virtual, a theme reflected in press representations of Earhart.

In 1932 Imperial Airways had just opened the world's longest flight routes, to Delhi and Capetown, but dangers and the potential for mechanical failure inhibited commercial transatlantic flight until 1938. Indeed, accounts record the mechanical failures that dogged Earhart's flight. Photographing flight was dangerous, and also presented the potential to record historic failure as much as document commercial success.[12] Press photography of 'aviatrix Earhart' manifested, in this vein, as a displacement - Earhart as the safe surrogate of innovative heavier-than-air technology [Figs.10 and 11.

In Robert Wohl's account of interwar aviation, a shift occurs in the framing of spectacles of flight from the 'heroic' to the corporate, as a consequence of the commercialisation and militarisation of flight and the restructuring of the 'flying fraternity' within the military.[13] Earhart's flight was seen as a watershed, as both a first and last: 'Many have said that the last great spectacular feat of this sort which remained in aviation would be a solitary Atlantic crossing by a woman'.[14] Her face floats in Sickert's work at the edge of an anticipated

historical caesura, the aftermath of Lindbergh. As Herrmann argues, Earhart's reception was heavily constructed by George Putnam's PR promotion, rendering her a commodity denuded of agency: "Unlike Lindbergh, who resists being positioned as a lone pioneer by invoking a brotherhood of fliers, Earhart functions as the copy of an image already in circulation".[15] Indeed, she earned the nickname 'Lady Lindy' from her resemblance to Lindbergh,[16] having had the opportunity to fly in 1932 because she embodied "the right image".[17]

While mention has been made, in the literature, of the painting's clear relevance to discussions on celebrity culture,[18] it has not sufficiently engaged with its complexities or, indeed, the manifest layering of imaging operations at work in *Arrival.* Sickert paints from a photograph of Earhart - a painting of a found image of a ready-made icon. Already in his choice of photograph, his intervention is dramatic.

In glamour shots promoting her flights [Figs. 10 and 11], Earhart is generally foregrounded, elevated above the press, gazing over the horizon, about to embark. She is represented as a protean figure, enabled by a flying prosthesis which stands at her command, secondary to her iconic visage. If we compare examples with Sickert's source image [Fig. 12], we see a celebrity marginalised, pursued by the spectacle she elsewhere dominates, mired in the social body and constrained by her attendant plane. In the front page of the *Daily Mirror* [Fig. 13 ] we observe the body of Earhart whole, free from shadow, and engaged as an agent in various diplomatic and commercial spectacles. Instead of the *Daily Sketch's* similar and adjacent image of Earhart shaking the hand of Ramsay MacDonald, Sickert opts for cropping the already compressed

mob of figures that crowd Earhart as much as greet her. In painting, Sickert reduces Earhart's active body to a passive head, while giving substance in facture and colour to brooding masculine figures that displace Earhart from the foreground. This frustrates the viewer scanning for the titular subject in the same move that frustrates the optimistic vocabulary of Earhart Imagery. Rather than the virtual realm of the imaginary of flight, Earhart is brought to earth - 'arrival' becomes a rhetorical denial of 'becoming'.

The first feature the viewer encounters in *Arrival* is instead the rain. Each drop is a punctuating mote the size of the heroine's face, each dragged across the surface as if it is a tear in its fabric. Indeed, the painting's power was experienced as fiercely haptic by its critics, who stressed its disconcerting power - "stinging rain", "vigorous, atmospheric...splashed across with rain from the thunderous clouds overhead".[19] The streaks of white across this canvas act in concert as marks with a great deal of compositional autonomy – standing as a diffuse layer of scumbled highlights, they play across all the other forms and devices of the painting. In Sickert's transparent and methodical working practice they supervene as the final layer in a painting so thin it often bares its own ground. Their dominance of the work is clear in their role in confusing and fusing the multiple figures whose order in recession has been heavily obscured during the transcription of the photograph. This painting works against its own legibility in the subordination of its content to the transitory and migratory brush mark, embodied by the raindrop.

In the photograph the rain is visually merged with the grain of

the photograph itself, becomes indistinguishable, and in the painting it becomes the dominant filter for our view of the painting's content, playing on the equivalence of brush mark and raindrop. Many of these droplets even 'penetrate' through to the under-painting, bearing dull brown haloes of the compositional space dedicated to them still visible to us at the surface. This is a painting which draws attention to the mechanical nature of its precedent at every turn, as well as its materiality.

This rain, this basic unit of the painterly process and reflection of photographic granularity, is almost a cipher for painting and photography. The medium's emphatic insistence on its own presence, a planned intervention in the very basis of the tonal under-painting, reifies the fundamentals of transcription. These marks are a reification of the construction of the image and its materiality, which gestures to its cycle of reproduction.[20] *Earhart's Arrival* is a work which exists as a material object in suspension between two phases of press photographic circulation.

The rain, like the grid of transcription, is self-reflexive, but unlike the grid and its conventional associations of neutrality, drawing and academic objectivity, the rain embraces a materiality. Running obliquely to the grid, it brings the substance of paint, and the unit of the brush-stroke, to the fore, but by an iterative procedure which haunts the painterly surface with its photographic foundation.

Press commentary was quick to recognise and stress the painting's photographic precedent, for some an "impression…inspired by a photograph of the Atlantic Flier's landing",[21] for others "practically a copy of a

snapshot".[22] The *Daily Sketch* even published the painting alongside the paper's own photograph of Earhart's arrival, visually drawing an equivalence [Fig.14]. Indeed, photograph and painting are read as almost interchangeable when the critic writes: "the photograph is still the better of the two". [23]

However, a sole *Morning Post* reporter pointed out what should have been obvious for the majority of reportage, but which escapes them:

> "The 'Arrival' shown at the Beaux Arts Gallery, 1a, Bruton-place, W., was at Hanworth in Middlesex and not made in the machine in which she flew the Atlantic..."[24]

While reporters occupied opposing extremes, whether they praised or decried it their opinions were based fundamentally on the painting's seemingly strict adherence to its verified source. Yet the plane pictured belonged to the news corporation *Paramount* - Earhart was its passenger from Ireland to England, not its commanding pilot. What we observe in the critical discourse is an effective conflation of photograph and perceived reality.

The *Daily Express* and the *Oxford Mail* both claimed that the painting portrays Earhart's landing immediately after her completion of the transatlantic voyage, while the *Yorkshire Post* also attempts a confused reading of the painting's transparency when it asserts the pictured plane is Earhart's own, despite being of radically different design.[25] Only the *Morning Post* asserts that "the picture does not illustrate 'an event of world-wide interest'"[26] – and it does so to berate both Sickert and the critical reportage of him. When Sickert extended invitations to its private view with the non-descript header 'Great New Painting', he primed

his audience to expect something novel and historic, and with his title he instructed them in how to project content onto the canvas. When he displayed a secondary flight of a different event, he provided contradiction. That critics remained certain of this painting's 'truth' reveals a faith in photography independent of its object - treating it as a general quality. The photographic quality of this "snapshot" painting allowed it to be read as effectively photograph-like and therefore 'reliable', but also problematically redundant - the painting is not the "better" of the two.

What did the 'truth function' of documentary photography 'mean' for these historical observers? Some major tendencies can be outlined regarding the documentary photographic still, however it is beyond the scope and length of this article to pursue a complete recapitulation of the contemporary medium of 'photography'. As John Taylor argues in his interwar analysis, at a popular level photography was being vested with a host of functions associated with conferring certainty and accessibility to viewers of its object, including the ability to document experiences of youth and adventure, and return the sights of empire across great distances: "the great promise of the photographic industry was reliability".[27]

Almost from its inception, one of photography's roles had been as an "aid" to history[28], and speaking in the 1930s on the centenary of its invention Paul Valéry offered a suggestive account of the indexical model of photography when he proposed a new criterion for historical truth: "COULD SUCH AND SUCH A FACT, AS IT IS NARRATED, HAVE BEEN PHOTOGRAPHED?".[29] This model of understanding time, as Tachtenberg has

argued, "takes the snapshot as its notion of adequacy, the equivalent of having been there".[30] With a clear debt to Barthes, Tachtenberg expands on the idea that from the late 19th century, to national collective imaginaries, photographs "confer nothing less than reality itself".[31]

Photography in 1932 was not only a key documentary medium, but was culturally loaded with 'truth' value, and considered a prerequisite for articulating the virtual as 'real'. As a historical documentary device, however, critical expectations of photography were being frustrated and confused when it came to representing the 'futurity' of breakthroughs in flight. When Sickert's critics debated the presence of the photographic in relation to flight in *Arrival*, they were testing the associations and potentialities of the technologies involved against this conceptual background.

To complete our review of the triad of media involved in *Arrival*, we must return to heavier-than-air flight. To finish providing a balanced and sufficient context for Sickert's work we will now discuss not only the visual articulation of flight, but the ambivalence in wider discourse which constituted its fundamental rhetoric. On the global stage, 1932 was an important turning point for British attitudes to flight. Britain had employed aerial bombardment in 'policing' Iraq until its independence in 1932, the same year in which Baldwin gave a speech on the potential impact of aerial bombing on London and the League of Nations began debating the formation of a global aerial peace-keeping force of which Britain was a strong proponent. As Baldwin outlined, heavier-than-air flight invoked awe for two principal reasons: its invisibility and its speed.[32]

Internationally, 'flight' was associated with potentialities. It activated both a utopian and dystopian imaginary. Politics and military theory often invoked highly wrought predictions about the capacities of flight often hard to distinguish from sensationalist journalism and science fiction of the period. Indeed, as Waqar Zaidi argues, discussion of international relations in the early 1930s was often bound inextricably with discussion of aviation – to the extent that the two terms 'constituted' each other[33] This coalesced, in 1932, around the League's Geneva Disarmament conference, which gave voice to a solution which had been building over the preceding years – the construction of an international air force.

At the same time, military theorists, enjoying a flourishing period of popular publication,[34] increased the stakes of the failure of peace in repeated works in the interwar period on both sides of the Atlantic: *The New Warfare* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1918); *'Neon'*, *The Great Delusion: A Study of Aircraft in Peace and War* (London: E. Benn, 1927); Charles Dennistoun Burney, *The World, the Air and the Future* (London: Knopf, 1929) etc. What these reiterate, as Meilinger isolates, is the paradox of deterrence logic: 'that airpower was a civilizing and humane instrument because it would make war so awful that it was less likely to occur'.[35] While some theorists disagreed as to whether aerial bombing had more impact materially or psychologically, consensus viewed strategic bombing with a sense of "horror and inevitability", with the potential to decimate countries with impunity and render all other military arms redundant.[36]

Air travel, the vector of 'air diplomacy', was also a vector for

aerial destruction. Flight was radically altering popular conceptions of time and space, both linking the territories of the empire and threatening the latter with disintegration, loading contemporary events with 'futurity'. Five years earlier, Lindbergh had been extracted from France by the military cruiser USS Memphis, and delivered, under 200 tonnes of confetti, to a reception in New York equal to that of a victorious general.[37] When Earhart received royal and prime ministerial receptions she was involved in a reiteration of the links between institutional and military power and celebrity and flight. In the words of a liberal pressure group to *The Times*, which could have been taken from H. G. Wells *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), flight promised an inescapable binary state: "Aviation will either destroy or save our civilisation".[38]

Taken as a whole in this atmosphere, the evocative language of Sickert's critics deserves to be treated seriously. Sickert's critics located technological resonances not only in *Arrivals'* perceived origins, but in Sickert's *process*. The genesis of the image was described in relation to flight, as if an act of 'flight' itself, conflating paint with its object in a lexicon which prioritises transition and journey over completion: "his inspiration grew new wings",[39] while the execution "required the same kind of power of endurance as the flight itself".[40] Yet for all this struggle, the image also fails to resolve, to 'arrive' in 1932, remaining a creature of press circulation like the event it describes, at best only "practically complete"[41], and at worst "practically a copy of a snapshot".[42] Moreover, intriguingly, as an object *Arrival* was treated as possessing a potentiality related to the

transatlantic circuit of flight. From its first moment of reception we find repeated predictions that it will be bought by an American buyer, as if its audience, its reach and potential were of the same register as flight: "It is anticipated that Mr Sickert's high-speed tribute to Miss Earhart may be purchased by an American, so that it may go to her country to remain for all time a permanent record of her triumphant flight".[43] *Arrival's* American buyer never arrived. Ephemeral and transient rather than commanding, Sickert's method was being read as inadequately iterative, and fundamentally incomplete.

Moreover, attestations of *Arrival's* 'snapshot' quality indicate that its method of production was also interpreted pejoratively as *photographic*. While the notion of its photographic origin had been seized upon as a demonstration of the work's value and 'truth', its photographic rapidity and 'mechanical' form of production drew scathing criticism. Critics attacked Sickert's thought process: "surrender of artistic conviction to topical interest"[44], and working method: "Mr Sickert has taken a portion of the photograph "squared" it up on a long canvas, coloured it pink and blue, added large drops of rain and called it Art".[45] Emphasis was laid on his "unfinished working method of presentation"[46], contesting the sense that this image met the criteria of 'art', and moreover suggesting that it failed to manifest, failed to 'become'.

Sickert's startling execution of a 'history' painting in five days resulted in feelings of unease, and the idea that such rapidity couldn't hope to represent its object however much it drew equivalence with its object's speed. Its very 'unfinish' seemed to reflect tensions surrounding the ambivalent potentialities of flight:

> "the picture as a whole makes it impossible to understand why the artist could not have taken a few weeks instead of a few days and produced something worthwhile."[47]

The notion of the 'unfinished' work dogged Sickert's relationship with the Royal Academy, and portraits such as *Rear Admiral Lumsden*, which was rejected by the R. A. because of such critique in 1927. Sickert had long opposed the smoothness of academic finish, and the fluid 'wriggle and chiffon' of Whistlerian *alle prima* surfaces, and in the ruptured dry-on-dry surface of *Arrival* the viewer sees the "untouched granulation"[48] of mark-making whose value he stressed. Baring its grid, ground, under-painting and impasto highlights all in the same frame, Sickert's surfaces problematised notions of 'finish' by evoking the grain of paint and photography, as well as the fraught potentialities of flight.

With both the qualities of flight and photography in his speed of painting, in Sickert's painting the trajectories of representation and the relationships between the three technologies were being unsettled. Common parlance is revealing in indicating the contagion of traits between them: "The speed bug which brought Miss Earhart across the Atlantic seems also to have bitten Mr Richard Sickert, the artist."[49]

This painting takes up our peripheral vision with its expanse, but remains oddly intangible. A fleeting moment rendered in rough paint, this painting is both impossible to ignore but not fully present. It stands as a material fact where its subject remains in doubt. We stumble our way through the work, waiting for it to settle, to cohere, but it resists. In foregrounding its process, its precedent and hasty

production, it makes us fully aware of the pressures of time. Once again the rain preys on our mind. To dry in time for the exhibition, five days from the publication of its photograph referent, these highlights would require two to three days. Requiring all of the layers beneath them to dry before they could be applied, these highlights were the last addition to the work and reveal this painting was made at the speed of the medium. To be dry in time, the painting would have to have been executed in three days. However, tantalisingly, audiences may have received 'liquid' rain - three months later his *La Louve* would be exhibited before it was fully dry.[50]

The very intractability of oil – a famously fluid and malleable medium – is here a precondition of the work and our experience of it. In a sense, we watch paint dry; feel the tension of a liquid becoming solid, made aware of the necessity of this transmutation in the genesis of a painted image. In its accreted surface we see paint parsing photography - foregrounding a photographic precedent, but one exposed by a mechanical method.

In *Arrival*, technologies rubbed up against each other - they were being tested materially and procedurally. In his 1934 Margate Lecture series we see Sickert's ontology of art rendered didactically in terms of process. He spoke affectively about what he saw as the problem of the hermetic surface, the erasure of the "traces of labour".[51] With the blending and smoothing of a conventional 'finish': "you are destroying the instrument you are using - you are vilifying it - you are doing to it something which is revolting because you are taking away its untouched granulation'.[52] In this lexicon of disgust and betrayal Sickert reverses

the academy's criterion of value – for him *finish* is an erasure rendering a work incomplete. Moreover, this litany of abjection is bodily – guilt, decomposition and touch – and emergent from over-working. The job of the artist is re-framed as that of preserving material knowledge. Indeed, picture and process are for Sickert indistinguishable – the painting is always already finished, only 'true' when it displays artistic "fumbling".[53]

Epistemologically, truth in painting is here a quantitative substance, accreted, a topography of facture in depth and not the smoothness of a conventional painterly surface. In amending a work, in obscuring its traces even by the erasure of the under-drawing: "You are taking away the fact - the trace of the fact that the black line touches the tops of minute hills on the paper'.[54] But at a certain point for every trace left, another is removed - traces begin to obscure the traces below. For Sickert painting is a material process, and in his Margate lectures he repeatedly called on his audience to "lose yourselves"[55] in an iterative process which was partly an end in itself.

The relation of Sickert's method here to photographic reproduction is one of sympathy and antagonism: "Obviously painters are not right substitutes for cameras because they do not get the information better than in the photographs that the 'Times' publishes'.[56] However, the aim is not the transcription of information but the emergent properties of iteration at the level of both repeated mark making and repeated appropriation, an accumulation of error: "Drawing is the variation of different forgers trying to forge a cheque'.[57]

We might think of Sickert's proposal as the process of making

inaccurate copies of copies, and that this is necessary and sufficient for a fine art object. The ontological basis of drawing and painting for Sickert lay in the preservation of their inheritance and their errata - their being in time: "They may deteriorate and they may not, but whatever they do, that passage from one to another is at least life in the sense that it is movement'.[58] This 'life'' however, was as precarious as it was mobile - for every palpable mark declaring itself there was another obscured. Paint too, therefore, contained a productive, if contradictory, dynamism in its material character, one which could be read incrementally in each dry layer of Sickert's fraught surfaces. Sickert's painting was the measure of itself and itself a measure, one through which other media could be read. Confident in such painting's perfect imperfection, Sickert did not improve upon other technologies but rather rendered them concrete, in the 'time' of painting, one mark at a time.

In *Arrival* we see paint "fumbling" in alien registers, the static made mobile, the traditional made photographic, the image displaced - complete but incomplete. At the level of facture the painting breaks itself down, alternating layers of thin washes, dry skeins and impasto notes. Hung after five days of work, this painting seems to even stretch the pace, order and logic of painting. Paint, as Sickert's material measure of time, is pushed to its limits. *Arrival,* at its heart, betrays a problematic 'time'. "It is not time that constitutes an achievement',[59] asserted the *Morning Post* - instead of capturing history, *Arrival* indicated the impossibility of capturing the future, playing with the time of three technologies: paint, photograph and plane.

It is in the conjunction of source and process, 'Truth' versus 'Speed', that we see the full implications of Sickert's reception for contemporary discussion of technology. *Arrival's* origin and production were both entangled with flight and photography. If we look at these press commentaries on *Miss Earhart's Arrival* lack of finish and the place of its referent in conjunction, we encounter an intriguing contradiction - a tension in time between beginnings, duration and a problematic 'arrival'. Sickert's painting was treated as effectively a factual portrayal, not because it represented the event it claimed to portray, but because it resembled a photograph as a finished image, and benefited from photography's association's of veracity. However, when we look at press critiques that consider Sickert's process, the painting is read as dubious, incomplete and unintelligible because his process resembled that of a camera in its speed, mechaniccalness and 'unfinished' surface treatment.

For both those who claimed it was reliable and unreliable, the surface is loaded with conflicting conceptions of immediacy, which both validate and invalidate the work on the basis of its relation to photography. *Miss Earhart's Arrival* generated friction between media – simultaneously convincing as an image since based on a photograph, but unconvincing because it treated painting like the act of photography and photography like the act of painting. Moreover, having drawn comparisons with its object in the form of process and in the mobility of itself as a transatlantic object, the painting also renders a similar problem for 'flight'. *Arrival's* speed is both a bravura performance and an incomplete one, while its pictured object is both unusually grounded and yet

problematically displaced.

Both the qualities of photography and aerial transportation are cast in doubt when engaged by critics in discussion of Sickert's contradictory *Arrival*. In reducing these technologies to a material and haptic time, their inconsistencies were exposed. By constituting the site of contact between photography and transatlantic 'flight', paint reinforces their reciprocal limitations. In the visual culture of the early 1930s aerial transport resisted photographic representation - with its implications of 'future', photography focused on scenes of departure or humanising proxy figures such as Earhart. In Sickert's work, the depiction of landing and debarkation undoes the conventional logics representing this cutting-edge celebrity spectacle of flight unproblematically by promises and proxies. While heavier-than-air flight was treated in multiple discourses with superlatives which often rendered it a creature invoking futurity, without being able to draw on the truth value conferred by photography without heavy framing and pre-conditions, there is a sense in which it remained suspect.[60] Moreover, by engaging the ambivalent utopian/dystopian nature of flight in *Arrival*, ambivalent attitudes to the process of photography were laid bare - its mark a necessary criterion for historical truth, but its process too restricted to the world of the actual to render the virtual implications of historic flights, its problematic speed revealed in tension with the problematic speed of the aeroplane.

These circulating doubts were made concrete in Sickert's painting, which indicated a gap in notions of representation. In *Arrival* we see the shadowy hulk of an aircraft in context looming over our view, rather

than the emancipated silhouette of the Plane's poster advertisements.

Layering imaging operations with the facility that he layered paint, Sickert flexes the limits of his medium. Having evaluated the social historical dialogues in which this image was involved, we see the potential extent of the implications of its mobilisation of 'time' in discussion of its impact on medium ontology. This painting obliquely engaged society's problematic relationship to its future, through a speed of execution as problematic as international 'flight' itself, and an appropriation of a photograph which brought the medium into question. We can think of this painting's transmediality frustrating the realms of the virtual and potential, the consumer and the military. While conventional images of 'flight' portray aircraft about to depart, Sickert grounds 'flight' before it can fulfil its pretensions. By shifting the co-ordinates of recorded time between painting, photography and 'flight', Sickert creates a space which opened doubts for the capacities of new technology. What *Arrival* questions is not a singular transatlantic flight, but perhaps whether 'flight', with all its constructed futurity, will ever arrive.

[1] *The Daily Telegraph* 7 July 1928

[2] In December 1928 a Christies 'market test' drew 65guineas for the largest Duncan Grant, while Sickert dwarfed all other modernists on show selling a pre-war work for 660gns. See The Daily Telegraph 1 Dec 1928 'Rise of a "Modern" Artist - Increasing Value of Sickert's Work - Sadler Collection' by A C A Carter

[3] Baron, *Sickert*, 2006 p.121

[4] Baron 2006 p.129

[5] Exemplified by Baron, Shone and Royal Academy of, *Sickert: Paintings*, and the more recent Baron,

2006
[6] Clive Bell, 'Sickert at the National Gallery', *New Statesman and Nation* (6 September, 1941)
[7] Browse, *Sickert,* p.50
[8] Corbett, *Sickert,* p.62
[9] Gore, 'The Winged Paintbrush: Aviation Genre Art', p.72
[10] Fanning, 'The Historical Death Ray and Science Fiction in the 1920s and 1930s', pp. 253-4
[11] Baldwin, Stanley, 'The Bomber Will Always Get Through' speech to the House of Commons, 10 November 1932
[12] In other fields, such as aerial entertainment/wing walking, in-flight photography had begun to emerge c.1920 in the U.S., though this material was also being curtailed by Federal regulations concerning flight safety from 1929 (e.g. http://www.thehenryford.org/exhibits/heroes/barnstormers/lillianboyer_p3.asp accessed on 28 July 2014). The exploits of wing-walkers et al. are also arguably distinct projects to document, for practical reasons, from feats of long-distance flight and cutting-edge technology upon which this article focuses, but it is important to note that some exceptions exist, and that general claims about photographic culture can only appeal to trends and not universals.
[13] Wohl, *The Spectacle of Flight,* p.5
[14] *Manchester Guardian* 23 May 1932
[15] Herrmann, 'On Amelia Earhart: The American Aviatrix as Dandy', p.86
[16] Goldstein and Dillon. *Amelia,* p.55
[17] Guest, Amy Phipps, American aviatrix and wife of former British Air Minister, quoted in Herrmann, 'On Amelia Earhart' p.76
[18] Nicola Moorby, '*Miss Earhart's Arrival* 1932 by Walter Richard Sickert', in Helena Bonett, Ysanne Holt, Jennifer Mundy (eds.), *The Camden Town Group in Context*, 2012, http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/walter-richard-sickert-miss-earharts-arrival-r1135622
[19] *The Scotsman* 13 Dec 1932
[20] It is worth noting that while the ability to record rain with photography arguably reveals a degree of technical achievement and thus legibility, I argue that the visual analogy between the rain drop and the granularity of photo-reproduction in the press is compelling, and indeed the photo-press was a medium under competition from higher fidelity photo-journals, as well as the new media of wireless and early photo telemetry, creating a space in which visual noise was increasingly a marked term.
[21] 'Sickert "Snap" in Oils', *Daily Express* 30 May 1932
[22] 'Brush and Camera', *Oxford Mail* 31 May 1932
[23] 'Artist Inspired by Photograph', *The Daily Sketch* 31 May 1932
[24] 'Mr Sickert''s New Picture', *Morning Post* 31 May 1932
[25] Despite the account in *Yorkshire Post* 1 June 1932, the pictured craft is a large monoplane capable of bearing multiple passengers rather than rather than Earhart's small biplane
[26] 'Mr Sickert's New Picture', *Morning Post* 31 May 1932
[27] Taylor, 'Kodak and the 'English' Market between the Wars', p.29
[28] Burke, *Eyewitnessing,* p.21
[29] Paul Valery, Speech on Centenary of Photography, 1939
[30] Trachtenberg, 'Albums of War: On Reading Civil War Photographs', p.1
[31] Ibid
[32] Baldwin, Stanley, 'The Bomber Will Always Get Through' speech to the House of Commons, 10 November 1932
[33] Zaidi, ''Aviation will either destroy or Save Our Civilisation'),' p.151
[34] Evidenced by multiple publications of fringe theorists who came to influence public thought to a much greater extent than military orthodoxy owing to this dynamic, illustrated in Meilinger, 'The Historiography of Air Power', pp.470-1
[35] Meilinger p.470
[36] Meilinger p.471
[37] Heppenheimer, *Turbulent Skies,* p.22
[38] Allen Clifford, founder of 'Next Five Years Group', speaking in 1933, quoted in Zaidi p.162
[39] *The Daily Mail 31 May 1932*
[40] 'High Speed Art', *Edinburgh Evening News* 31 May 1932

[41] 'Aviation and Art', *Daily Record and Mail,* 30 May 1932
[42] 'Brush and Camera', *The Oxford Mail* 31 May 1932
[43] 'Sickert "Snap" in Oils'', *Daily Express* 30 May 1932
[44] *The Daily Mail* 31 May 1932
[45] 'Artist Inspired by Photograph', *The Daily Sketch* 31 May 1932
[46] *Oxford Mail* 31 May 1932
[47] *Oxford Mail* 31 May 1932
[48] Walter Sickert, 'Black and White Illustration', *Lecture* 30 November 1934, reproduced in Gruetzner Robins, *Walter Sickert,* p.665
[49] 'High Speed Art', *Edinburgh Evening News* 31 May 1932
[50] R.R. Tatlock, 'Sickert's New Masterpiece', *Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 1932
[51]Walter Sickert, 'Black and White Illustration', *Lecture* 30 November 1934, reproduced in Robins p.665
[52] *Ibid* p.665
[53] *Ibid* p.664
[54] Walter Sickert, 'Black and White Illustration', *Lecture* 30 November 1934, reproduced in Robins p.665
[55] Walter Sickert, 'Squaring up a Drawing', *Lecture* 2 November 1934, reproduced in Robins p.634
[56] Walter Sickert, 'Underpainting', *Lecture* 9 November 1934, reproduced in Robins p.641
[57] Walter Sickert, 'Squaring up a Drawing', *Lecture* 2 November 1934, reproduced in Robins p.636
[58]Walter Sickert, 'Underpainting', *Lecture* 9 November 1934, reproduced in Robins p.643
[59]*Morning Post* 31 May 1932

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These have been reinserted, see text body for comments

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[60] For more see 12